

Pomegranate Promises



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The breeze teased through the trees above Elara, causing the shadows to flicker across her as the branches shifted to block or let the sun through. With the sun resting high in the sky, just a little past midday, she knew she'd have some time before her mother or any of the palace guards came to look for her. Just her among the wildflowers and the birds that chattered at each other from their perches among the leaves.

Laying back among the grass and flowers, she let her eyes track a bluebird as it emerged from the shadows. Though after a streak toward the edge of the trees, even turning her head so the grass tickled her cheek didn't keep it in her sights. Instead of letting her gaze slip back up to the sky as it winked between the trees above her, she turned her head all the way over toward the mountain range the small forest backed up to.

Her mother was very stern that no one was to go near the mountains, the whispers that dangerous creatures ventured along their ridges a scary bedtime story she'd grown up listening to. Though, she'd learned last year the lies those were. Sure she smiled sweetly, told her guard and mother she never ventured too close. Never close enough to touch, to dare a venture into the small cave that's opening hid behind a large oak. A cave she wasn't supposed to know about either.

The world was quiet, save for the birds and rustle of the flowers as a breeze kicked up around her again. He was late and it caused her to frown some. Normally meticulous about being here to meet her, it worried her that something might have come up. Or worse something had happened. Would she need to try and slip through the cave to see if he were alright?

A click of stone against stone had her push herself up to her feet and slip behind the oak quickly. The skirt of her dress swished around her legs, threatening to tangle and bring her down if she wasn't careful. Not that she let it slow her any as she entered the cave.

The torches in the iron scones already burned with a blue flame, casting shadows to elongate and shorten. Her first time in the cave, the way the light played along the walls and corners of the room had frightened her. Now, they were as familiar as the dark-haired man who seemed to melt out of them. Her lips lifted in a warm smile as she watched him rest a hand against an invisible barrier.

Soft-heeled shoes made no sound as she took a few steps closer to the magic that held him on his side, just close enough she knew she'd be safe before she launched herself at him. Her skin tingled as she passed through the barrier, the magic licking along her skin and ruffling her dark hair, but it was the warm embrace catching her that had her melting happily. "You are late, Aldric" she huffed against his neck as her arms kept steadfast and tight around him.

She felt and heard his chuckle as he placed a kiss to her temple. "Apologies, 'lara." His hand teased down her back as he kept her close, letting her have the lingering hug. "My brother held me up trying to guess the new woman in my life."

Slowly, she let him go enough that she could turn her green eyes up to his face. Though her nose wrinkled at the mention of his brother. "So you were able to give him the slip?"

"Not quite," the voice that came from down the darkened tunnel behind Aldric caused Elara's heart to pound faster.

Shifting slightly, Aldric turned them both as Ian slinked out of the shadows. Not too close to them though, instead he chose to lean against the wall just at the tunnel's end. "How dare you follow me."

Elara rested a hand on Aldric's chest to keep him with her, to stop him from marching up to his brother. Though she honestly couldn't think of what to say at being caught. The only thing worse would be her mother finding them here, though she knows thankfully that her mother is too interested in the planning at the palace.

A lift to Ian's shoulder answered Aldric as he glanced down at his hand like it had dirt on it. "Our people should know you're sneaking off to snuggle up to the kingdom that cursed us. I suspect they will not be too happy to hear it. Especially when she's being auctioned off to the highest bidding suitor her mother can find in a few weeks."

Green eyes narrow at Ian and Elara makes it two steps toward the man before Aldric catches her arm. She doesn't fight him as his arm settles around her waist and he keeps her

pinned back against his chest. However, she does point a finger at him. "Like you know anything. I am not going to let her marry me off to anyone." She sinks back against Aldric, head canting to the side a little so she can meet his gaze. "I am spoken for."

"And yet he cannot attend the ball and claim you." Ian threw at her. He pushed off the wall and tossed a piece of fruit at them. "You can fix this little problem though. Your mother might actually uncurse us if she had to free you from here." Without another word, Ian disappeared back into the shadows and down the tunnel.

Aldric's hand caught the pomegranate instinctively, holding it palm up for them to look down at. Though the silence that stretched in the cave was deafening. "I am not going to force you to trap yourself over here with me."

"Anyone who eats a pomegranate from Kronas is destined to live their life there, never to return from the world," she murmurs as her hand comes to rest over the red temptation in his hand. She'd read up on the curse that had been laid on Aldric's kingdom two generations ago, trapping an entire kingdom beneath the mountains. That they'd been able to continue to live and flourish, despite being cut off from the world had been a show of incredible strength. "I do not want to marry anyone else, Aldric."

Shifting, he turned her in his arms so he could look down at her easily. "Nor do I want you to marry anyone else. But he is right, despite his arrogance, I am not free to attend the ball and claim you either."

A shout from outside the cave drew both of their attentions. One of the guards was looking for her. Taking a deep breath, Elara shifted on her toes to press a soft kiss to Aldric's mouth. "Bring one to our next meeting. I just need a few days to settle things, and pack a few things I do not wish to leave behind."

Before she could slip out of his arms, Aldric pulled her back in for a deeper kiss. "If you are sure," he murmured against her lips when they broke for air.

“I am as sure as the rock under our feet and the sun in the sky, Aldric. I just want to tend to a few things.” She offered him a smile and a kiss to his cheek before she slipped from his grip. Moving quickly, she moved back across the barrier and shivered at the magic that seemed thicker than a moment ago. Like it knew her intention would be to stay on the other side permanently this time. “Three days, Aldric, and this time do not be late.”

Another shout, closer this time, had her move out of the cave without his answer. Though her heart told her that he wouldn't. Not with her promise to join him in his exile underground. What she wasn't sure of, was Ian's assumption her mother would raise the curse just to get her back. Her mother was as cunning as the queen who had sealed them underground. But she'd be with Aldric, and that would be all that mattered to her.

The sun warmed her face for only a moment before she slipped around some trees through the shadows so she could come from the opposite direction. Only then did she break into the clearing and the sights of the guard looking for her. “There you are! Your mother is calling for you.”

With a bob of her head, she let the guard herd her in the direction of the palace without another word or glance back at the oak tree and its hidden cave.

About the Author

Meri Benson is a Chicago native that has always been in love with the written word. When not living in other people's worlds, she's creating her own. From urban fantasy worlds that mirror our own to fantasy worlds that transport you to fantastical places, she loves crafting them all. Her favorite distractions from creative endeavors and writing is her cat that enjoy 'helping' by settling himself on her, or whatever project has stolen her attention away from her number one "fan".

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